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Women ponder Mass. glass ceiling

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Before the votes were even counted, her fellow Democrats had compiled a list of reasons why Martha Coakley had struggled: anemic retail politics, a blind-eye to shifting momentum and an inexplicable appearance on a sports talk radio show that led her to misidentify a Red Sox star.

There was truth to them all. But they also glossed over an obstacle that received far less attention in her losing bid for the Senate: a glass ceiling that remains almost impenetrable, even in the blue state of Massachusetts.

To get an idea of how mind-bending the gender dynamics in this campaign were, consider this:

If a male attorney general and former prosecutor had been running against a woman who'd [posed nude for Cosmopolitan magazine](#) and whose law practice consisted mainly of real estate closings, would he have been the one reduced to praying for a squeaker victory? Would she have even gotten elected to the state Senate?

No and no are the probable answers. But it is an illustration of the kind of double standard voters apply to female candidates — a double standard that some longtime women's advocates see in the success of Republican Scott Brown, whose college-aged centerfold and lesser professional success didn't prevent him from capturing Ted Kennedy's old Senate seat from the Democrats.

The lack of success of female candidates in Massachusetts compared with, say, nearby Maine, where both senators are women, is striking.

"It took 222 years for Massachusetts to elect its first woman, running in her own right, to statewide office, and that was Shannon O'Brien as treasurer in 1998. Martha Coakley is only the second one. Welcome to liberal Massachusetts," said Mary Anne Marsh, a Democratic strategist based in Boston.

Two other Massachusetts women have been elected as lieutenant governor, but they were running on tickets headed by male gubernatorial candidates. A third woman, Jane Swift, was promoted from lieutenant governor to governor after her predecessor resigned to take an ambassadorship. But Swift, who had twins while in office, was accused of ethics violations for asking members of her staff to babysit her children and didn't run for a full term.

When POLITICO's Jonathan Martin asked Coakley recently if her gender was a factor in the race, Coakley demurred: "People ultimately will look at my record."

Before Tuesday night's results, Rep. Niki Tsongas (D-Mass.), the only female member of the state's congressional delegation and the only member of it to give an early endorsement to Coakley, said it was too early to tell what role gender played in the

election but “there’s a great deal of excitement around electing the first female senator.”

Many women Democrats in the state had the same sense of possibility when Hillary Clinton ran for president in 2008. They loaded into cars and crossed the border to help Clinton win the critical New Hampshire Democratic primary in 2008. And after the state’s then all-male congressional delegation endorsed Barack Obama over her, those same women helped Clinton defeat Obama in Massachusetts’s own primary.

National and state women’s organizations were among the first to rally around Coakley, and they worked hard to get their voters to the polls.

“She gets strong support from women. They’ve seen her protecting kids from sexual predators. She’s solidly pro-choice. It’s just a question of whether there will be enough,” said Ellen Malcolm, the founder of EMILY’s List, an organization that supports female Democratic, pro-abortion-rights candidates, who returned POLITICO’s call from a Massachusetts campaign office.

Ruth Mandel, who developed and directed the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers, said the progress of women in elective office in Massachusetts is about average for the nation.

When analyzing the state’s Legislature, “they are a little above the middle mark. Their percentage is about or just above the national average,” she said. “I wouldn’t say Massachusetts has a great story to tell for women in politics, nor is it a tragic, sad tale. It is a typical tale in women’s struggle to move forward in representation in elective politics.”

“The party machinery is in the hands of men, who have always held it and turned it over to people like themselves,” Mandel said. “Women have to fight their way in.”

Malcolm, who has spent more than two decades helping women get elected, agrees. “In many ways, Martha has been the outsider and not part of the political establishment. I think we’ve seen that over and over again with women who run” in Massachusetts. “It’s a tough climb.”

Coakley’s gender played to her favor in the Democratic primary. Her three male opponents attacked each other but for the most part left her alone.

In the condensed general election period, she refrained from making outright appeals to women or emphasizing the historic nature of her candidacy that, if she had won, would have made her the state’s first female senator and have brought the number of women in the Senate to a record 18.

Brown didn’t raise the issue, either, but, unlike her primary opponents, didn’t hesitate to attack her record or tie her to the unpopular Democratic agenda in Washington.

Still, the issue became something of a subplot — a negative one — in the campaign. A female Boston Herald columnist called Coakley an “ice queen” and “mean girl” after Coakley refused to answer media questions.

At rallies and on the Internet, Brown backers said worse things. One supporter shouted that he should “shove a curling iron up her butt,” a crude reference to Coakley’s handling of a sexual assault case. Others cheered on the notion of Coakley being raped.

But it wasn’t just Republicans delivering slurs. Massachusetts labor leaders expressed

frustration at the anti-woman bias in their ranks. "I'm not voting for the broad" is the message Teamster leader Robert Cullinane told POLITICO he's hearing.

"Women in politics in general have a tougher time than men. Even though Hillary Clinton won [Massachusetts] by 15 points, people still said things and acted in ways that were sexist," said Rep. Jim McGovern (D-Mass.), who spent most of Tuesday morning holding a Coakley sign in the snow outside polling stations.

And Massachusetts has not been immune to sexist issues in politics. McGovern said he was especially upset by a recent story in a local paper that described Coakley's new hair style and makeup routine as the reason the race got closer. "They wouldn't write this about a man," McGovern said. "I still think we have a long way to go to make this an equal playing field."

No matter how the Massachusetts race turned out, Mandel said, even the fallout will be uneven along gender lines.

"He [Brown] will emerge from this whether he wins or loses. He will be somebody his party will look toward now because he's gone beyond all expectations," she said.

"Unfortunately, this will be tough for Coakley either way. Even if she wins, the victory party will be both a huge relief but also tinged with the pain of what this has caused for the people who thought this race was theirs."